

***PRACTICAL GUIDE  
TO PERMITTING  
IN THE HARVARD SQUARE  
CONSERVATION DISTRICT***

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*Cambridge Historical Commission*

*May 2001*

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## Introduction to the Harvard Square Conservation District

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*A neighborhood conservation district established under Ch. 2.78, Article III of the City Code and administered by the existing Cambridge Historical Commission, in conjunction with zoning amendments that maintain current FAR provisions in Harvard Square, will be an effective tool for preserving and protecting the remaining historical buildings in Harvard Square, while encouraging the architectural diversity that characterizes the area.*

On December 18, 2000, the Cambridge City Council voted unanimously to establish the Harvard Square Conservation District. The goals and guidelines developed by the Harvard Square Neighborhood Conservation District Study Committee, along with instructions for making applications to the Cambridge Historical Commission, are provided in this booklet.

In making its determinations, the Commission will operate under guidelines intended to preserve historic resources while encouraging the social, economic, and architectural diversity that characterizes the Square. The Commission has binding review over demolition, new construction, and publicly-visible exterior alterations to existing buildings, and can, in appropriate cases, impose dimensional and set-back requirements in addition to those required by zoning. The Commission collaborates with the Harvard Square Advisory Committee on large projects that require special permits in the Harvard Square Overlay District.

The staff will conduct administrative reviews of building permit applications in order to expedite approval of routine projects. It is anticipated that applications for interior alterations and other work not visible from a public way will be approved on the same day that they are submitted. Applicants must be given an initial response to an application within five business days, and hearings are generally concluded within 45 days unless the review period is extended by the applicant.

The continued vitality of Harvard Square depends as much on fostering architectural creativity and excitement as it does on protecting significant buildings and references to our past.

However, the power of the Historical Commission extends only to the appearance of things that are visible from a public way. The Commission cannot preserve particular uses and the character they generate.



Fig. 1 Farwell-Read Block in Harvard Square, 1999.

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Contact the staff of the Historical Commission if you have questions:

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## Application Procedures

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1. **Pre-application consultation.** Whenever possible, call the Historical Commission staff before submitting an application. You and the staff member can discuss the scope of the project and determine if the application can be handled administratively, or whether an *Application for Certificate* form should be completed and a public hearing scheduled. 617/349-4683 (telephone) or 617/349-6112 (TTY).

The Commission issues three types of certificates:

Certificates of Appropriateness may be issued when the Commission has determined that the construction or alteration will be appropriate for or compatible with the preservation or protection of the district.

Certificates of Nonapplicability may be issued when an application does not involve an exterior feature, or when the exterior feature is not then subject to Commission review.

Certificates of Hardship may be issued when failure to approve an otherwise inappropriate project would involve substantial hardship to the applicant and the Commission determines that the project can be accomplished without substantial detriment to the purposes of the district.

2. **Fill out application.** If the staff determines that a written application is required, you may obtain an *Application for Certificate* form in person or on the Commission's web site (<http://www.ci.cambridge.ma.us/~Historic>) or by calling to request that a form be sent to you. Complete instructions are provided on the application form, but if you have any questions, please call the Commission staff. There is no filing fee for applications, but we do request that you submit 12 copies of your application and supplemental materials.

Applications should be completed, signed by the record owner, and submitted with plans and other supplementary materials by the filing deadline. Meeting dates and filing deadlines are available online or by calling the office.

The following materials should be submitted with the completed application form:

- dimensioned site plans of existing and proposed conditions including structures and lot lines,
- dimensioned elevations of existing and proposed conditions,
- schedule of exterior materials to be used,
- Dimensional Form from BZA application for any project that also requires zoning relief,
- For projects involving new construction, also include sun and shadow studies (at winter and summer solstices, AM and PM) and streetscape elevations showing relative heights of surrounding buildings.

NOTE: The staff may waive the requirement for submitting some of the above materials if the work is of a minor nature.

3. **Post placard and attend hearing.** A public hearing may be scheduled and advertised. A placard advertising the hearing must be posted on the property at least 7 days before the hearing. The placard and posting instructions may be obtained at the Commission office. The applicant or a duly-authorized representative should present the proposal at the hearing and answer any questions. The Commission may make a decision at the hearing, though complex cases may require one or more continuances.
4. **Certificate issued.** After the public hearing, the staff will issue a certificate. Unless the application was denied by the Commission, the applicant may then continue the building permit process through the Inspectional Services Department.
5. **Review and compliance.** If the Commission delegates review authority to the staff or to the Architects Committee, the applicant should remain in contact with the staff until any pending items have been approved. Usually this review is conducted before a building permit is issued, but on-site inspection of materials or workmanship may occasionally be required.

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## Preservation and Development Goals of the Harvard Square Conservation District

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The City Council adopted the following goals for regulating preservation and development in the Harvard Square Conservation District.

### PRIMARY GOAL:

The goal of the District is to guide change and encourage diversity in order to protect the distinctive characteristics of the District's buildings and public spaces, and to enhance the livability and vitality of the District for its residents and all Cambridge residents, students, visitors, and business people. The Historical Commission WILL seek to preserve and enhance the unique functional environment and visual form of the District; preserve its architecturally and historically significant structures and their settings, and encourage design compatible therewith; mitigate any adverse impact of new development on adjacent properties and areas; and discourage homogeneity by maintaining the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and ages. The District must remain a pedestrian-friendly, accessible, human-scale, mixed-use environment that complements nearby neighborhoods and maintains the history and traditions of its location.

The following secondary goals for the District are intended to provide general guidance to the Historical Commission in a wide variety of situations, and are not intended to be applied to every project that will come before it. They are statements of policy, not prescriptive measures that must be applied equally in each situation.<sup>1</sup>

### SECONDARY GOALS:

1. Preserve historically or architecturally significant buildings and structures as well as those that contribute to the distinctive visual character or historical significance of the District.
2. Sustain the vitality of the commercial environment by preserving architecturally-significant or original building fabric where it currently exists. When this is not possible, support creative, contemporary design for storefront alterations and additions.
3. Support creative, contemporary design for new construction that complements and contributes to its immediate neighbors and the character of the District. Recognize and respect creativity of design during the review process and mitigate the functional impacts of development on adjacent areas.
4. Build on and sustain the diversity of existing building form, scale and material. Preserve and encourage flowers, green yards and courtyards and small, free-standing and wood-frame buildings where that character prevails. Encourage streetwall buildings where that character has been set. Encourage ground-level, small-scale storefronts to preserve the vitality and character of the streets.
5. Expand the high quality public environment established in the heart of the District with attractive and compatible materials, lighting, and street furniture.
6. Expand the network of pedestrian walkways and paths wherever they can conveniently provide alternate routes through the District. Increase public access to alleys and interior spaces where appropriate, and upgrade paving and landscaping of such pathways and spaces. Enhance accessibility and safety for pedestrians throughout the District.
7. Encourage new residential projects in the District, especially in mixed-use buildings, and support existing residential uses.
8. Encourage projects that will maintain a wide diversity of uses serving the needs of surrounding neighborhoods, students, and visitors from around the world.
9. Encourage creative solutions to the District's parking and transportation issues, including the problem of on-street deliveries. Discourage loading docks, which do not generally contribute to the historic character of the street.

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<sup>1</sup> The secondary goals originated as part of the 1986 Harvard Square Development Guidelines. They were updated and expanded to link development with preservation concerns and to identify individual goals for alterations and new construction.

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## **Guidelines for Demolition, Construction & Alterations in the Harvard Square Conservation District**

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In making its determinations, the Cambridge Historical Commission operates under goals and guidelines designed to protect historic resources while encouraging the architectural diversity that characterizes Harvard Square. Guidelines that are clear, detailed, and easy to apply help to maintain consistent interpretation of urban design and preservation priorities for Harvard Square.

All applications are reviewed by Historical Commission staff for compliance with the guidelines, and the staff actively engage applicants in discussions about the objectives and nature of the project. The staff can advise the applicant throughout the application process, and may coordinate reviews by the Historical Commission and the Harvard Square Advisory Committee. Historical Commission and Community Development Department staff advise both boards.

The following guidelines for demolition, construction, and alterations expand upon the language of the Ordinance to provide additional guidance for administration of the Harvard Square Conservation District.

### **A. Demolition**

Although the City's demolition delay ordinance does not apply in the Harvard Square Conservation District, demolition is similarly defined as "the act of pulling down, destroying, removing or razing a structure or commencing the work of total or substantial destruction with the intent of completing the same" (City Code, chapter 2.78.080F). The Cambridge Inspectional Services Commissioner has interpreted "substantial destruction" as including removal of a roof or one or more sides of a building, gutting the interior to the point where exterior features are impacted, or removal of more than 25% of a structure. Work of this sort is reviewed under the following demolition guidelines, while the removal of building components, including signs and storefronts, is reviewed as an alteration.

The purpose of reviewing demolition within the Conservation District is to preserve significant buildings and the diversity of building ages, styles, and forms that help to define the historical character of the Square. Other benefits include the opportunity to review the significance of individual buildings in the context of specific development proposals, to consider creative re-use possibilities, and to encourage the care and maintenance of the building stock.

The Historical Commission will issue a Certificate of Appropriateness to an applicant seeking to demolish a structure in the Conservation District if the project, including both the demolished and the replacement buildings, is determined to be "appropriate for or compatible with the preservation or protection of the . . . district." (City Code, chapter 2.78.170). Approval of demolition is dependent on a finding by the Historical Commission that a) the demolition of the structure does not adversely impact the district, subdistrict, or abutting properties in the sense described in secondary goal #1, and b) the replacement project meets the purposes of the Conservation District with respect to secondary goals #3 through #9, where these are applicable.

The history of Harvard Square suggests some specific criteria that may be applied to demolition proposals. Buildings that are over fifty years old, that are contributing structures in the Harvard Square National Register District, or that are part of the Square's dwindling inventory of wood-frame structures, are generally valued for their contribution to the character of the Square, and it may be presumed that preservation will be strongly preferred to demolition (secondary goal #4). However, all such applications are reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and the Historical Commission will not necessarily protect all such structures from demolition.

### **B. Construction**

Creative design solutions to development and renovation requirements are encouraged to ensure that the unique resources and character of Harvard Square are protected (secondary goals #2, #3, #6, #9). Coordination with the Harvard Square Advisory Committee's large project review is essential.

## 1. New Construction/Additions to Existing Buildings

Harvard Square is a kaleidoscopic urban environment. The Historical Commission recognizes the continuing evolution of architectural design and the necessity of keeping the Square fresh, vibrant, and economically viable. Contemporary design expression is encouraged in new construction (secondary goal #3).

Proponents of projects requiring special permits on sites with little apparent impact on historic resources are encouraged to initiate their public review process with the Harvard Square Advisory Committee. To the extent feasible, the Historical Commission will hold joint meetings with the Advisory Committee on projects that fall within both jurisdictions. The existence of parallel reviews by the Commission and the Advisory Committee is seen as a productive application of both zoning and historic preservation disciplines in a complex urban environment; in the event of conflict, however, conservation district protection, which requires Historical Commission approval of building permits, will prevail. Because the specific circumstances of every development project cannot be predicted, it is not possible to specify an exact regulatory protocol governing the sharing of reviews between the Historical Commission and the Advisory Committee. The inherent logic of the project review process will guide the proponent.

The Historical Commission begins its review of a new construction project or addition with an analysis of the historic significance and architectural value of the premises and its immediate surroundings. New construction that accommodates older structures on or adjacent to the site are encouraged. Construction that incorporates significant major portions of older structures may be acceptable; however, use of isolated historic architectural elements is discouraged. Demolition involving retention of facades to allow replacement of historic structures with new construction (mis-named "facadectomies") is discouraged unless the supporting historic fabric is found to be unsalvageable.

In reviewing new construction or additions to existing buildings, the Historical Commission "shall consider the appropriateness of the size and shape of the structure both in relation to the land area

upon which the structure is situated and to structures in the vicinity." (City Code, chapter 2.78.220A). Review of new buildings is guided by considerations such as the appropriateness of the structure's height, scale, mass, proportions, orientation, and lot coverage; the vertical and horizontal emphasis, rhythm of openings, transparency, texture, and materials of the publicly-visible facades; sunlight and shadow effects; relationship to public open space; and landscaping.

Review of new buildings and additions is further guided by consideration of the relationship of a proposed building to the site and to other buildings and structures in the vicinity. For planning purposes, Harvard Square has been divided into six smaller areas, or subdistricts. Applicants should refer to the discussion of the existing conditions and preservation and development goals for a particular subdistrict. The *Goals for Harvard Square Subdistricts* are available by calling the Historical Commission.

Under the City Code, the Historical Commission acting as a neighborhood conservation district commission "may in appropriate cases impose dimensional and setback requirements in addition to those required by the applicable provision of the zoning ordinance." (City Code, chapter 2.78.220A) Implementing such a measure could result in a reduction of the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) allowed by zoning. The appropriate circumstances for imposing dimensional and set-back reductions could include a wide disparity of scale and density between the proposed project and its surroundings, or a situation in which the proposed project would destroy or diminish the historical resources of the site.

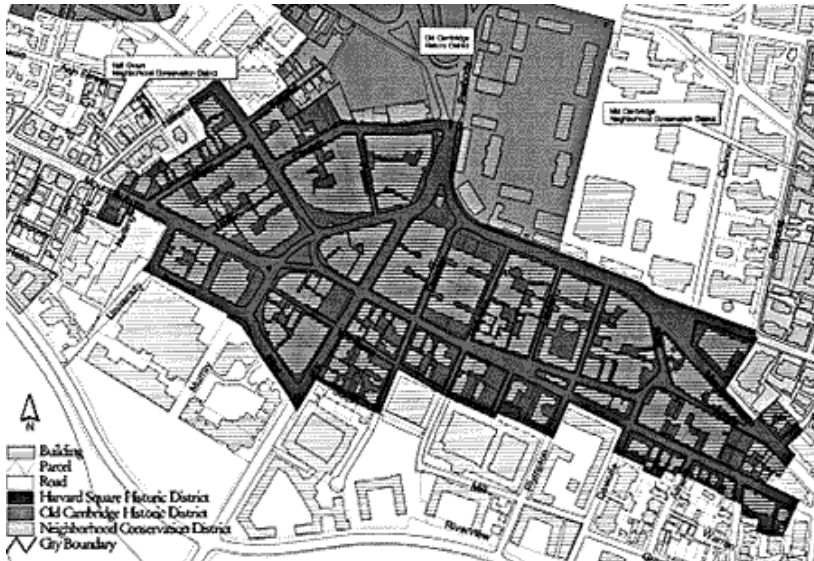
## 2. Alterations to Existing Buildings

Alterations to exterior architectural features visible from a public way are subject to binding review by the Historical Commission, guided by secondary goals #1, #2, and #4. Storefronts are treated more flexibly than building facades or upper stories. The goals of the district favor retention and repair, rather than replacement, of original or significant exterior fabric.

While irreversible changes are subject to review and approval of the Historical Commission, certain other visible exterior alterations are reviewed by the staff or exempted from review entirely.



## Map of Harvard Square Conservation District 2001



See also the online map of districts at the Commission's website:  
<http://www.ci.cambridge.ma.us/~Historic/mapshome.html>

The following features are categorically exempt from review and will not trigger an application process:

- Storm doors and storm windows (subject to specific design guidelines).
- Signs that conform to the Cambridge sign code as amended in the Harvard Square Historic Overlay District.
- Exterior color is categorically exempt from review in neighborhood conservation districts.

The Historical Commission has delegated to the staff the review and approval of some reversible alterations which have the potential to adversely affect historic fabric to the staff. Applications for projects that do not meet these criteria are considered by the Historical Commission at a public hearing. A Certificate of Nonapplicability will be issued by the staff if Conservation District guidelines are followed. These categories will include:

- Ordinary repairs or maintenance using similar materials and construction details to those existing.
- Reconstruction replicating the exterior design of a building, structure, or exterior architectural feature damaged or destroyed by fire, storm, or other disaster, provided such reconstruction is begun within one year thereafter and carried forward with due diligence.<sup>2</sup>
- Roof repairs and HVAC equipment not visible from a public way.
- Window replacement in conformity with guidelines to be adopted by the Commission.

### a. Interior Work and Alterations Not Visible From a Public Way

Interior arrangements and alterations to architectural features not visible from any public way are exempt from review in the district

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Such replacement work will still be subject to review of the staff and issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness.

and a Certificate of Nonapplicability for such work will be issued by Historical Commission staff.

b. Storefronts

Storefronts are a source of Harvard Square's continuing vitality, and the Historical Commission encourages creativity in this regard (secondary goal #2). Most storefronts are regarded as impermanent and the Historical Commission looks favorably on creative alterations that meet the particular needs of the retailer or office tenant, as long as the original structure and finishes are maintained or recovered (where they still exist). Alterations to upper stories are regarded as having the potential for significant and permanent adverse effects and are reviewed accordingly. Reversible changes to storefronts are not discouraged as long as they do not obscure or damage the structure or any original architectural features. Opaque glass is not generally allowed in display windows unless specifically permitted.

The Historical Commission has delegated review and approval of two categories of storefront alterations to the staff. Applications for storefront alterations that do not meet these criteria are considered by the Historical Commission at a public hearing. A Certificate of Nonapplicability will be issued by the staff for:

- Alterations that do not alter, enclose, or extend further than the decorative or structural framework of the building or retail space originally intended to surround a storefront. The framework consists of such elements as piers, columns, cornerboards, quoins, cornices and similar structural or decorative features.
- Storefront alterations that do not obscure, remove, relocate, or replace historic or original exterior architectural features. Exterior architectural features may include, but are not limited to, such features as brackets, window and door casings, fascia, hoods, bays, and window sash.

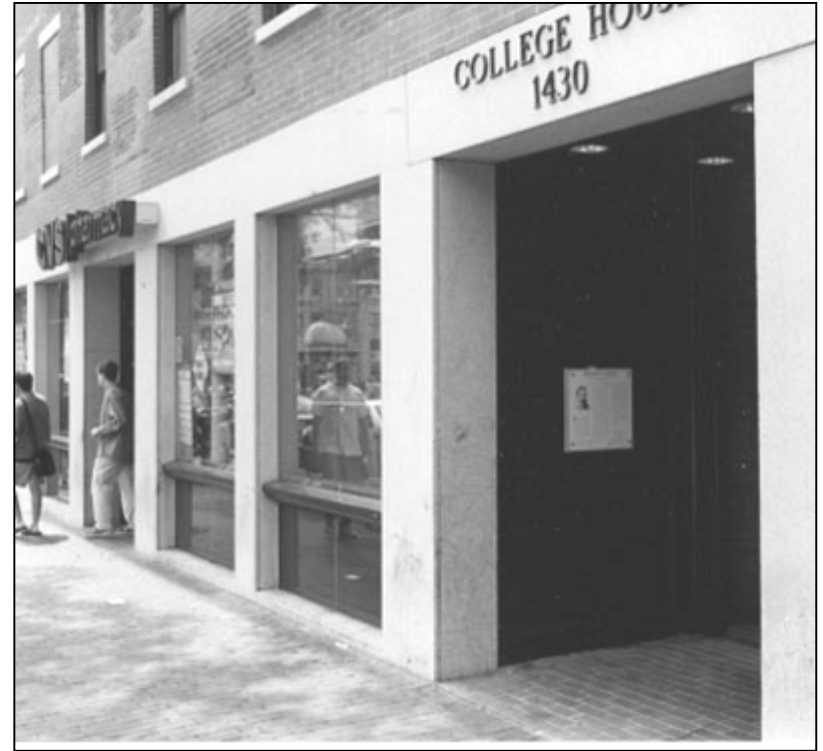


Figure 2. College House storefront, 1999.

Recent storefront alterations that comply with the guidelines can be seen at College House (1420-1442 Massachusetts Avenue); Origins at 8 Brattle Street; and Tess at 20 Brattle Street. In all three cases, structural members or decorative finishes of the original first floor facades were uncovered or restored, and new storefronts were inserted within them. In the case of College House, this involved both restoring and replicating the original granite piers and lintels of 1832 and inserting a plate glass storefront system that recalls a traditional storefront with a horizontal wooden sill applied to the glass (Fig. 2). At Origins, a ca. 1930 storefront was removed and the original marble-clad pier and fascia restored; the new storefront was installed within this frame.





Figure 3. Tess storefront, 20 Brattle Street, 1999.

Finally, at Tess several generations of storefronts were removed, the brick piers of the original facade were restored, and a new fascia recalling the destroyed original was installed. Within this reconstructed framework is a radically-original glass storefront that respects the original architecture of the building but makes a strong and exciting statement (Fig. 3). Alterations such as these would have merited Certificates of Appropriateness, issued by the Historical Commission staff.

A few storefronts in the Square retain their original design or have a subsequent design that is significant in terms of architectural or historical significance. The following storefronts and/or the buildings in which they are located are specifically designated as requiring Commission rather than staff approval of alterations:

- 1304 Massachusetts Avenue (Gnomon Copy) (Fig. 4)
- 1316 Massachusetts Avenue (Leavitt & Pierce)
- 1320-22 Massachusetts Avenue (J. August)
- 30-30A Plympton Street (Bow Street Flowers)



Figure 4. Coes & Young (Gnomon Copy) storefront, 1304 Massachusetts Avenue; Coolidge & Carlson, architects, 1907

Alterations to these storefronts, including installation or alteration of signs, requires a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Historical Commission. Additional significant storefronts may be identified in the future and a recommendation made to the City Council that they be added to the protected list.

#### c. Windows

Windows are critical to maintaining the characteristic appearance of significant buildings. Replacement of wood windows with inappropriate modern units can destroy the traditional appearance of a building. The Historical Commission will establish design guidelines for window alterations governing materials, muntin patterns, pan40ning, and reflectivity.

In almost all cases, modern replacement windows are available that match the originals in appearance while offering significant energy efficiency. The Historical Commission will, in most cases, allow window replacement routinely as long as design guidelines are met. Applications to replace windows that are ornamental in design or that contain significant original sash requires review.

Review and approval of certain window alterations are delegated to the staff. For example, window alterations that do not change the size of the opening, configuration of the muntins, material, or transparency will receive a Certificate of Nonapplicability in the same manner as the exempted storefront alterations.

#### d. Masonry

Harvard Square contains many outstanding examples of brick masonry construction. Because the appearance of masonry can be irreversibly altered by improper pointing or cleaning, approval of specifications is necessary for cleaning, cutting joints, mortar composition, and joint profiles. Replacement masonry units are reviewed for color, size, and finish. Painting of masonry surfaces without a Certificate of Appropriateness is prohibited.

#### e. Signs

Signs in Harvard Square should contribute to the commercial vitality of the area. Uniformity of signs and conformance to

conjectural "historic" designs are not encouraged. However, signs should not obscure any original architectural features of the structure on which they are located. Signs should be fastened to structures in the least destructive way possible.<sup>3</sup>

The Harvard Square Overlay District has been amended to transfer jurisdiction over signs to the Historical Commission. Limitations on the number of projecting or free-standing signs on a lot; size of individual signs; and height of signs above the sidewalk, and placement of signs, have been deleted from the zoning ordinance with respect to the Harvard Square Historic Overlay District and are now subject to Commission review. Under Chapter 2.78, Article III, the Historical Commission has binding jurisdiction over size, materials, dimensions, illumination, and appearance of new or altered signs.<sup>4</sup> However, signs that do conform to the provisions of the Zoning Code, Article 7.0 are exempt from Historical Commission review.

The provisions for signs and illumination in the Zoning Code are complex, and the following description of permitted signs should be taken as only an introduction to the subject. Please consult the staff of Inspectional Services, Community Development, or the Historical Commission for an assessment of any proposed sign.

In business and office zoning districts, the total area of wall signs such as would be allowed for the typical storefront can be no greater than 1 sq. ft. for each foot of frontage, although a building with more that 60' of is limited to a maximum of 60 square feet for any one wall sign. Wall signs cannot be higher than 20' or above the second floor window sills, whichever is less, and may be illuminated only in accordance with specific guidelines. Temporary signs pertaining to special sales or events lasting no more than fifteen days may be affixed to the inside of windows, provided they cover less than 30% of the window area. Different rules apply to projecting signs and free-standing signs. The total area of all signs

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<sup>3</sup> Sidewalk sandwich board signs are subject to permitting by Public Works and are not subject to Conservation District review.

<sup>4</sup> Content, color, and graphics used on signs - the commercial message - are exempt from review in the Conservation District.

on the exterior of the building may not exceed one square foot for each linear foot of sign frontage.

For residential properties in residential districts, signs can be no larger than 1 sq. ft. per dwelling unit, with a maximum of 10 sq. ft., and no more than 10' high when placed on a building. Such signs can only convey the street address, occupant's name, and/or identification of an accessory use, such as a professional office.

Applications for signs that do not conform to the zoning code will be reviewed by the Historical Commission to determine if they conform to the guidelines and thus may be issued a certificate.

### C. Public Spaces

Municipal and utility company modifications to sidewalks, streets, and street furniture are subject to review by the Historical Commission. Review is undertaken with consideration to the appropriateness of such materials and structures as paving and curbing, light standards, traffic and parking structures and signs, and utility structures visible at or above grade from a public way.

The Historical Commission may adopt a master plan for the treatment of publicly-accessible private open spaces in Harvard Square and may suggest public improvements of sidewalks, crosswalks, and lighting. The Commission encourages privately-initiated efforts to improve the public spaces of the Square and serves as a public forum for discussion of alterations and coordination of privately- and publicly-funded improvements.

Proposals for public art installations, whether private donations or public projects, are referred to the Public Art Commission for a recommendation in accordance with established city policies.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of conservation district review, three-dimensional artworks are considered to be structures and murals are considered to be signs if they contain an explicit message. In general, such

installations must also be found to be appropriate for the setting and district as a whole.

The Cambridge Historical Commission was established in 1963 to protect historic properties in Cambridge, mark historic sites, advise property owners on preservation issues, and research and publish information about the history and architecture of the City.

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<sup>5</sup> See "City of Cambridge Art Gifts and Donations Policy", adopted May 17, 1999, and Chapter 2.114 of the City Code, "Public Development Arts Projects."